

have to go far, in terms of miles on the map, but it was mostly uphill and the rain had left the ground muddy and slick. Carmichael found that he wasn't quite as fit as he'd assumed. By the time they got to the trail out to the cabin he was breathing hard.

The advice Kravitz had given them was easy enough to follow, and they were able to approach the cabin stealthily enough – but when they got there it seemed that there had been no need for stealth. It was dark and seemed deserted.

The door was locked but the enterprising Sergeant Andrews got them inside without using brute force. The interior was neat, but there was no real sign of contemporary occupation. It was like hundreds of other homes which had been abandoned in the course of the plague war. It had not been looted – but it was no treasure-house by anyone's standards, and looters could afford to pick and choose nowadays.

"Looks like they moved on," said Andrews, when they'd briefly checked all the rooms. He wasn't the kind to insult his own man by wondering aloud whether Kravitz had somehow contrived to direct them to the wrong cabin.

"Leaving precious little behind," Carmichael agreed. He knew that he'd have to search more thoroughly, looking for something that might prove that Franklin had been here, and he knew only too well how tedious such a search might be.

"I'll take a look around outside," said the sergeant, probably feeling that it would be diplomatic to give Carmichael some space.

Carmichael nodded. He didn't have equipment with him for dusting for fingerprints – he'd have to come back later, or ask Burke for help, if it became necessary to look for evidence of that sort. All he could do for now was look for clues of a grosser kind. He started in the larger bedroom, checking the floor and the drawers. After ten minutes without any result he moved into the kitchen.

When he heard the front door open he assumed it was the sergeant coming back. He didn't bother to call out as footsteps approached the kitchen door, which stood ajar, but waited until the door swung inwards before looking round.

The man who stood in the doorway wasn't Andrews – it was a man in a police uniform. The expression on the cop's face was difficult to read, but Carmichael realized that his presence in the cabin might take some explaining.

"It's okay, officer," he began, as the policeman drew his gun. "It's..."

While he was speaking his arms spread out reflexively, palms wide open to indicate his harmlessness. He realized with less than a second to spare that the gesture wasn't having the desired effect – that the cop was going to shoot. He had no time to scream for help; he barely managed a plaintive "Hey!"

The gun made a curious spitting sound, which seemed to make the whole experience surreal. Carmichael looked down at his chest, and saw some kind of dart sticking out of his shirt, with a red stain slowly spreading around it.

*It's not a bullet*, he thought. It seemed almost as bizarre as it would have if the gun had released a flag with BANG! printed on it.

He felt his amazement turning into giddiness, and

swayed to his left. He had time to catch himself up once, before swaying the other way. This time he couldn't help himself, and he was conscious of slowly falling over, crumpling at the knees. As soon as he hit the ground consciousness fizzled out.

He awoke in a dimly lit room, slumped in an old armchair; it didn't take his eyes long to adjust to the light, but there was a roaring pain in his head and he squinted in the hope that it might help the pain to go away.

"Drink this," said a voice, pressing a cup to his lips. It was cool water. After he'd taken a sip the cup was placed in his hand, and when his eyes were fully open he saw two white tablets in an open hand. He looked up at the man who was offering them to him.

"Aspirin," said the blond-haired man. "Good for your head and your heart."

Carmichael took the tablets and swallowed them, washing them down with the water. As he did so he looked around. There were two other people present: a second man, and Lucy Vollman. The second man was dark, shorter than the other. Like Kravitz before him, Carmichael couldn't tell from the photographs he'd seen whether the blond man was Franklin – nor could he tell for certain whether the dark man was Abel. He handed the cup back to the man who stood over him.

"There was no need for this," he said, glancing at the girl. "If you wanted to talk, all you had to do was call."

The girl looked down at her fingernails, but she didn't seem particularly guilty about having lied to him.

"We have to be discreet, Dr Carmichael," said the dark man. "These are troubled times." Carmichael noted that he seemed to have a full set of teeth, which – if they weren't false – were in remarkably good condition for a man of his age.

"Dr Abel?" he said, experimentally.

The dark man grinned. "Am I still recognizable?" he asked.

"You'll have to do better than a little superficial somatic engineering," said Carmichael. "Your genetic fingerprints will still be the same. Even if you've done a little creative gene-switching, you can't change that. And the fact that you left a few teeth behind for the investigators to find does rather imply that you weren't an innocent victim of the attack on your labs. Perhaps, like Dr Franklin here, you should have been content to leave nothing. What did you do with Sergeant Andrews, by the way?"

"Sergeant Andrews hasn't suffered any permanent damage," said Abel. "Even his ego will recover, in time – and he doesn't ever have to know what happened to him, if you decide not to tell him."

"Actually," added the blond man, "the fire may have been a little too effective. We had hoped to convince the investigators that we were both dead. But we didn't start the fire, and we didn't leave any of our own people to burn. We simply had enough advance warning to make a few preparations. The human bones were those of plague-victims – easy enough to acquire around these parts. We hoped that everybody would believe that the bombers had succeeded – including, of course, the bombers."

"Yes?" Ruig replied, wondering what the man might want. Some communities still sent out messengers like this, when seeking a Witness. Ruig preferred them to log a message with his signaller: that way there was no one to break his peace as he travelled with Boy. Ruig would have to refuse, in any case, as he already had an engagement at a settlement in the Windrush valley, to Witness a dispute between that village and its neighbour.

The man seemed confused, as if he did not know what to say. "Yes?" said Ruig again, letting his irritation show. He hated company, when he had the trees, and the hills, and Boy.

"Ruig," repeated the man, grasping for words. "My name: Ruig."

"No," said Ruig. It was his turn to falter, the sensation unfamiliar. "No, I am Ruig. You have come to find me, to seek my help, perhaps?" He felt sorry for the poor man, obviously confused, perhaps simple, although one was only simple through choice or design these days.

"No," argued the man. "My name is Alcaj Ruig Tre. I am a traveller. I saw you here, alone. I sought companionship."

Alcaj for his father. Tre for his mother. Ruig for the Caster who had tuned his genes in the hours after conception. The newcomer shared not only his public name, but also the private fore- and aft-names of his family. Alcaj Ruig Tre.

"A strange coincidence," said Ruig, father of Boy. "We share all three names." He tried to put his discomfort aside. The man was merely a traveller who shared his three not-uncommon names.

"Strange indeed," said Ruig, the traveller, who was not a Witness, and not father of Boy. "And here, on the same road." He nodded again, in greeting, and made as if to move away. "A Mentor once told me that coincidence is the work of the Devil," he said, "so if I may excuse myself..." He started to walk on, up the slope.

"Boy!" called Ruig, the Witness. "Hup! Hup!" The traveller glanced up, but continued on his way.

Boy grew from speck to silhouette to stooping, naked boy-hawk-bullet, cutting down through the mild air. Ruig raised his hand, but the Boy had mistimed his dive, would need to return for another pass.

But instead Boy headed for Ruig, the traveller, still walking up the slope. Wings and tail spread, braking against the air. Ruig, the traveller, looked up again as the turbulence ruffled his hair; then, instinctively, he raised his hand, and Boy landed gently, scrambling up his arm to chuckle softly into the man's ear as, in the early days, he had done to Ruig, his father.

The man continued to walk and Ruig started to panic. He felt, irrationally, that he should let them go, Boy and father, walking up the slope. He shook himself, gathered up his bag from the ground. "Hey!" he called, and began to scramble up the slope, as man and child disappeared into the mouth of the forest.

Trees closed in above them, around them, so that the light, filtered through countless layers of leaves and tendrils, was as green as the vegetation itself. Green flowers grew from the litter of leaves and sticks on the forest floor. Green birds flew, tiny emeralds flickering in and out of the fringes of

Ruig's perception. As a boy he had spent hours, days, just sitting quietly, motionless, waiting for the woodland fauna to emerge; a travelling Witness only ever saw a tiny fraction of this wildlife, as he moved and disturbed.

They had been walking for some time, now, and Boy was still on the Traveller's shoulder, both frustratingly uncommunicative, both green, in the dappled woodland light.

Ruig had shared his journeys, on foot, on hang-car, on public train, with many unwanted companions before. They were drawn to him like ants to sugar. As a Witness, people fed him, housed him, clothed him, and these unwanted companions followed in the hope of living on his leftovers, dwelling within his sphere of goodwill. Most of all, they sought the protection of his Ward, a device which shielded him from bullet and spear and knife. The Ward was rarely employed, though, as everyone knew that he, a Witness, had its protection; but if, somehow, its defensive field was breached, they all knew that punishment would not be far away. He was, in a very small way, something of a god to the people he watched over. He was the arbiter of their lives.

But if this man, this Alcaj Ruig Tre, the Traveller, was merely another parasite, then why had Boy flown to him, as if to his own father? Why did Boy ride on this interloper's shoulder, sparing barely a glance in Ruig's, his true father's, direction?

Perhaps the man carried some means of enchantment to which Ruig was immune. Some device, some gadget, some new augmentation about which Ruig had not heard. But then, Ruig thought, as he struggled to keep up with the fit man's pace through the trees, over the protruding roots, up the steepening slope... but then, perhaps he was not immune after all? Perhaps he was in this strange man's thrall just as much as Boy. Why else would he struggle so, to keep up? He could always have another Boy cast from his tissues – all it would take would be a visit to the city, and the price of the Caster's time. Money had little meaning to a man who spent all his days travelling and living off the kindness of strangers. There were even Casters who worked for free, for the love of their craft, if he was not prepared to pay. It was such a Caster who had worked with him when Ruig, himself, was a boy, with his first owls and hawks, grafting into them a bonding, a mental affinity, an understanding of the way Ruig thought.

They had reached the lip of the hill, now, and before them the wooded country spread out as far as Ruig could see. The forest here was chequered with machine-tended fields, and great glass growths where the more tender crops were raised. Below them, at the foot of the scarp-face, was the village that was Ruig's destination.

"What are you doing here?" demanded Ruig, as they rested before their descent. "Why have you come?" He was unaccustomed to feelings of defensiveness, invasion. He was a Witness: no one had ever intruded on his life to quite this extent before.

"I am a traveller," said the other Ruig. "What are you doing here?"

"You've been sent to trap me," said Ruig, the real Ruig. He looked at Boy, and said, "Why do you travel on this man's shoulder? You should be up there" –